

HERITAGE OF THE WALDENSIANS: A SKETCH

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Origins

Historical difference of opinion concerning the origin of the Valdenses¹ claims either that they derived their name, organization and beliefs from Peter (Valdo) of Lyons in France, or that they pre-dated Peter who probably acquired the name Valdo from his connection with the Valdese.² These people were known as Vaudois and Valdenses in ancient writings pre-dating Valdo.³ Peter and his followers were first known as the Poor Men of Lyons, who were expelled from that city in the 1180s before they joined with the valley men of the Cottian Alps in northern Italy. Volumes have been written on both sides of this question. Suffice here to note that it is most likely that the French word for valley, *vaux*, gave rise to the nickname Vaudois, while the Italian *vallis*, likewise created Vallenses or Valdesi or Valdenses, all meaning “valley-men,” referring to those who lived in the near and remote reaches of those valleys of the Cottian Alps lying within the dioceses of Milan and Turin.

The Roman Catholic Church, who steadily persecuted them through the centuries, maintained that the Valdenses derived their origin, name and beliefs from Peter (Valdo) of Lyons. It is more probable that the Roman Catholic authors are as mistaken in their statement of the origin of the Valdesi as in their statement of their heresies. It was not in Roman Catholic interests to admit they opposed a group which traced their history back to apostolic primitive Christianity in a purer tradition than the Roman.⁴

The Valdese themselves trace their descent as a church to the time of Claude, Bishop of Turin in the ninth century.⁵ Those churches were probably the descendants—spiritual, if not lineal—of the many generations of believers in that area of northern Italy since the early days of the church. There was a line of bishops and leaders there, started by Ambrose, Bishop of Milan in the fourth century, who maintained independence from the Roman See, upheld the supremacy of Scripture in all things, including the gospel of justification by faith alone. Many of the successors of Ambrose through subsequent centuries held to the same doctrines.

Of these was Claude, “the most distinguished advocate of evangelical doctrines whom that age produced,” who boldly resisted Roman innovations, “owned Jesus Christ as the sole Head of the church, attached no value to pretended meritorious works, rejected human traditions, acknowledged faith alone as securing salvation, ascribed no power to prayers made for the dead, maintained the symbolical character of the Eucharist, and above all, opposed with great energy the worship of images which he...regarded as absolute idolatry.”⁶ It is to this bishop the Valdenses claim their origin as a church, although spiritually, they could and often did, claim a descent as well from the evangelical groups preceding Claude, those groups led by the evangelical leaders after the time of Ambrose, and perhaps before Ambrose, back to the earliest Italian converts. Such early Christians are believed to have taken refuge from persecution in the Alps valleys where the traditional independence of these northern Italian bishoprics provided a protecting shield to those later to become known as the valley-men, the Valdenses.

The *Noble Lesson* (*Nobla Leyczon*) was the basic creed of Valdese beliefs. It dates itself within its text to the year 1100.⁷ This pre-dates Peter of Lyons, who with his followers, were chased from Lyons about 1186, when they joined the valley dwellers, the Valdese. (Lyons is situated in southeast France, west of the Italian border and the Cottian Alps.) The *Lesson* mentions the Vaudois (Valdese) as being already persecuted and as having already a well-known history.⁸ The idiom of the *Nobla Leyczon* is that of the valleys, the Romance language, and not that of the idiom of Lyons, a French dialect, which it would have been if Peter (Valdo) and his Poor Men had authored it.⁹ No mention of Peter and his followers is found in the *Lesson*.

Standing Firm in Persecution

The courage and perseverance of the Valdese throughout their persecutions is a tale beyond the scope of this short article.¹⁰ The severest campaigns against them filled the 13th through the 17th centuries, with short periods of respite now and then. To condense their sufferings into one inadequate paragraph, the nouns deceit, trickery, broken promises, flattery, threats, robbery, pillage, slow tortures, destruction, slaughter, exile might serve for a start. The Roman Catholic persecutors ripped limbs from live victims, dashed the heads of children against the rocks, marched fathers to their deaths with the heads of their sons around their necks; parents watched their children violated and murdered. Other tortures were too vile to describe. Women and children were thrown off high peaks to be dashed to pieces. Valdese taking refuge in caves were suffocated by fires lit at the cave mouths. Soldiers took refuge in Valdese homes, only to rise up and slaughter their hosts upon the given signal.

In J. A. Wylie's words,

"These cruelties form a scene that is unparalleled and unique in the history of at least civilized countries. There have been tragedies in which more blood was spilt, and more life sacrificed, but none in which the actors were so completely dehumanized, and the forms of suffering so monstrously disgusting, so unutterably cruel and revolting. The 'Piedmontese Massacres' in this respect stand alone. They are more fiendish than all the atrocities and murders before or since, and Leger may still advance his challenge to 'all travellers, and all who have studied the history of ancient and modern pagans, whether among the Chinese, Tartars and Turks, they ever witnessed or heard tell of such execrable perfidies and barbarities.'"¹¹

In a document Pastor Henri Leger carried from the Valdese to the Protestants of Europe, they wrote,

"Our tears are no longer of water; they are of blood; they do not merely obscure our sight, they choke our very hearts. Our hands tremble and our heads ache by the many blows we have received. We cannot frame an epistle answerable to the intent of our minds, and the strangeness of our desolations. We pray you to excuse us, and to collect amid our groans the meaning of what we fain would utter."¹²

For the love of the Scriptures

The Valdese in their most ancient works would speak of themselves as being in communion with the Catholic Church,¹³ while at the same time setting forth only those doctrines of the primitive Catholic church and not at all those of later Roman Catholicism. Nonetheless, though they knew that Christ had ordained only two sacraments, they recognized most of the Roman sacraments, but with more Biblical interpretations on them. For instance, their practice of “repentance” and “confession” was more of a spiritual than an outward duty as in the Roman ritual: “. . .that of penitence depends, in the first place, on a displeasure and sorrow for sin, and in the second place, on a fear not to fall into it again.”¹⁴ The power of “binding and loosing” they understood to be the pastor’s ability to give good advice for a man’s deliverance from the bondage of sin.¹⁵ Idolatry, prayers to saints, and purgatory they abhorred. But they distinguished between mortal and venial sins. They refused to call their pastors “Father”, preferring to use *barba*, (plural, *barbe*) meaning “uncle.” They admired but did not require celibacy in their clergy.

All through their long history these valley dwellers, the Valdese, had owned, revered, obeyed their Scriptures. It was their great glory to hold Scripture as their supreme authority. They translated the Bible (possibly from the Hebrew and the Greek) into their vulgar tongue, the Romance language, and laboriously made many copies of this Scripture for their disciples.¹⁶ And this while the rest of Europe was content with the Latin of scholars. Before Wycliffe thought of putting the Bible into the English of his day, the Valdese had their vernacular Bible. They memorized great portions of Scripture. One inquisitor in 1260 tells of meeting a pastor who recited the whole of Job, and of many others who memorized the whole of the New Testament. They copied other good writings; this was one of the tasks of the Valdese *barbe* in order to instruct their disciples. Old bibliographies tell of many ancient manuscripts of spiritual treatises, poems, sermons, confessions, catechisms and the like.¹⁷

With such a love of truth in a people, we are not surprised to learn that they founded their own little college for the *barbe*, who

“were required to commit to memory the Gospels of St. Matthew and St. John, the general epistles, and a part of those of St. Paul.... During two or three successive winters (they were) trained to speak in Latin, in the Romance language, and in Italian. After this they spent some years in retirement, and then were set apart to the holy ministry by the administration of the Lord’s Supper and by imposition of hands.”¹⁸

Pastors were required to take their turn as missionaries. They went out two by two, a young man and an old one. Taking to the roads as peddlers, or as artisans, or as physicians, they carried the Bible in their hearts and minds. Stopping for the night in a remote cottage in the course of their travels, they would testify of the gospel and write out Scripture portions to leave with their hosts. A light and a blessing wherever they went! Very few were married, as their manner of life, travels, poverty, and the attendant dangers often precluded family life. They traversed Italy and had stations organized in many places with thousands of secret adherents in most of the towns. And not only Italy, but Valdese missionaries spread the Gospel over the greater part of Europe.¹⁹

High up in the impenetrable remoteness of their highest mountains stands still today the small stone building of the college of the *barbe*, in a tri-level construction to fit the slope. Modern travelers today draw in breath as they gaze at the smoke-blackened walls, the tiny windows, the fireplace, and the great slabbed table-top, said to be six to seven hundred years old.

It is not hard to imagine the student-*barbe* seated around that huge stone slab. Today on the center of the slab is an open Olivetan Bible, and thereon hangs a tale.

A Legacy of Light

At the time of the Reformation, the Valdese heard with amazement the news of a spiritual renewal within the apostate Roman Catholic Church throughout Europe. In 1526 and 1530 they sent messengers down the mountains to ascertain the truth of such reports. The French and Swiss reformers were just as amazed to hear of believers who had kept the faith through the centuries. It was as if they heard the voice of the primitive and apostolic church bidding them welcome to the truth. William Farel returned the visit when he with others traveled in 1532 to the Valdese Synod at Chanforan up in the mountainous valleys. There for six days they hammered out the truths of the Reformed Faith. The reformers accepted the *Noble Lesson* as an orthodox statement of faith. But it would seem that the Valdese understanding of predestination needed a clarification and a polish, given and received.

At that time the Valdese had been in a period of great discouragement and disarray, and had frequently hidden their faith by worshipping in caves and other secret places. Often members would outwardly conform by attending Roman Catholic mass and confession in order to avoid the deadly, relentless pursuit and tortures of the Roman Church. Four centuries of it! Throw the first stone if thou darest! The reformers instructed them that they must leave the caves and worship in the open; they must build churches and there worship and cease all conforming. This the Valdese did. As Wylie puts it, thus did the new church repay the old for her faithfulness in past ages, and thus did the older receive the counsels of the younger. "The first" had become "the last", and "the last" first. Nonetheless, the Valdenses had somewhat also to offer. They said in their firm way, "We who have received the Scriptures from the Apostles or their immediate successors, and have always preserved to ourselves this blessing, do now wish to pass on these Scriptures to others who have been without."²⁰ And they initiated a French translation of the whole Bible.

Robert, a cousin of John Calvin, was chosen to be the translator. It took him three years. Holed away up in the tiny college of the *barbe*, and working probably on that very stone slab we can see today, he toiled night and day. The common folk would trek down to the towns to procure for him the pure olive oil, the best for the light, and so much of this he used, that he acquired the nickname "Olivetan." To this day history still calls him Robert Olivetan, and his great work the Olivetan Bible. These poor mountain folk, the Valdese, paid for the whole of the project, the translation, the printing and the publishing. This was an immense expense for so poor a people, but they gave what their fathers had preserved with their blood, the Word of God. This gift blessed the French-speaking churches of Europe for three hundred years. Now who was "the first" and who "the last"?

These people had somewhat to glory of in their long history of continuous adherence to the truth, but not before God. They had a pressure of guiltiness and a sensitivity to sin, so strong that "they never cease to bring forward the expression of it again and again in their different works."²¹ "We have turned aside from the path of truth. The light of righteousness shines not in us." or, "The sun of understanding is covered with clouds; iniquity holds us fast in its trammels." or, "The works of man are of little avail for salvation." or, "I am timorous and very slow to do

good.” or, “I pray you affectionately, by the love of the Lord, to abandon the world, and to serve God without fear.”

And with that word, let us leave our sketch of the history, the thinking, the spirit and the contribution of a great people to the ever-reforming church of Jesus Christ. Their descendants have not kept their fathers’ faith. Today the Waldensian Church, which held out against persecution for centuries, has succumbed to the temptations of liberal theology. Their young men, sent abroad for studies, imbibed what would soon kill the church, namely, the unbelief of theological liberalism. The Waldensian Church today is a member of the World Council of Churches, and few are the pastors who still maintain the faith in the Scriptures that their forefathers died for. Perhaps the best thing we today can do to repay those brave stalwarts of history is to pray for the revival of their faith amongst their descendants.

¹From the variety of form which their name has taken through the ages, I have chosen to use primarily the form Valdese or Valdenses, as being closest to the familiar English form Waldensians.

²In those ages people did not pass on family surnames. A second name was added to one’s given name to indicate origin, or occupation, or some notable characteristic of the individual.

³Alexis Muston, *The Israel of the Alps, A Complete History of the Waldenses and Their Colonies; Prepared in Great Part from Unpublished Documents*, Vol.I, Translated by Rev. John Montgomery, (Blackie and Son, London, 1875), page 18.

⁴“There is no point on which authors, zealots for the Church of Rome, and full of passionate hatred against the Vaudois, ought to be read with more suspicion than that of the antiquity or recent (i.e. after Peter Valdo) origin of the detested sect (i.e. the Valdese).” Rev. John Montgomery, translator of Muston, *op.cit.*, Vol II, page 516.

⁵When Napoleon, in conquering northern Italy, questioned the Moderator of the Waldensian Church, Monsieur R. Peyran, when the Valdese had become an independent church, the Moderator replied, “At the time of Claude, Bishop of Turin.” See Stephens, Capt. R.M., *The Burning Bush*, privately published, 1975, page 15.

⁶Muston, *op.cit.*, Vol I, pages 8 and 9, giving his primary sources for the statements.

⁷“Already eleven hundred years have run their course

Since it was written, ‘This is the last time.’” (quoted in Stephens, *op.cit.*, page 17).

This date is interpreted variously in its context, either as 1100 years after Christ, or after his sermon in Matthew 24, or after the writing of the Book of Revelation. None of these necessitates a connection with Peter (Valdo).

⁸Muston, *op.cit.*, Vol II, Appendix, page 421

⁹*Ibid.*, pages 422,453,459.

¹⁰For thrilling yet utterly horrific accounts from witnesses in these persecutions, the best authorities are Alexis Muston’s *Israel of the Alps*; J. A. Wylie’s *History of Protestantism*, Vol. I, pages 18-32, and Vol. II, pages 430-512; and Henri Arnaud’s *The Glorious Recovery by the Vaudois of Their Valleys*. A short, popular account is Capt. R. M. Stephens’ *The Burning Bush*. These sources abound as well in stories of innumerable escapes, victories, and valiant testimonies to reward the reader.

¹¹Rev. J. A. Wylie, *The History of Protestantism*, 1878, Vol. II, page 485. This monumental work has been republished by the Mourne Missionary Trust, Kilkeel, North Ireland, 1985.

¹²*Ibid.*, page 486.

¹³Muston, *op. cit.*, Vol I, page 10.

¹⁴Muston, *op. cit.*, Vol II, Appendix, page 462.

¹⁵Muston, *op. cit.*, Vol I, page 21-24.

¹⁶Muston, *op. cit.*, Vol II, Appendix, page 448.

¹⁷Muston, *op. cit.*, Vol II, Appendix, Bibliography, *passim*.

¹⁸Muston, *op. cit.*, Vol I, page 19.

¹⁹Valdese missionaries evangelized Bohemia before the time of John Huss. In 1142 six of them were condemned and beaten in Oxford, England, thrown out of the city in mid-winter and left to perish. In Cologne, 1332, a *barba*, named Walter Lollard, was burned at the stake. From him came the nickname Lollard for English followers of Wycliffe. (Stephens, *op.cit.*, page 12)

²⁰See the Preface in the Olivetan Bible.

²¹Muston, *op. cit.*, Vol I, page 25.